

CHAPTER 9

ANECDOTES AND BRIEF ITEMS

The Working End of an Engineer

Brigadier General William L. Marshall, Chief of Engineers from 1908 to 1910, weighed some 300 pounds. A gifted raconteur, he had a delightful sense of humor. One of the stories he enjoyed telling was how he became Chief.

Summoned to the White House in the summer of 1908, he reported to President Theodore Roosevelt, who queried: "Do you want to be Chief of Engineers?"

"I have never asked for anything," Marshall replied. "I am a soldier, sir."

"Well," said the President, "I'm going to make you Chief if you can complete the 90-mile ride I'm requiring of all mounted colonels." When Marshall began to chuckle, Roosevelt demanded: "What are you laughing about?"

"Sir," said Marshall, "If you have a horse that will carry my 300 pounds for ninety miles, I guarantee to stay on top of him."

"That's just the trouble," Roosevelt shot back. "You're too fat. You should keep fit like I do. My aides and I pound the saddle five hours a day, when we can find time, in order to stay fit and be worthy of our Cavalry tradition."

Still chuckling, but in his most respectful tone, Marshall answered: "Mr. President, a cavalryman keeps fit by pounding the saddle. But an Engineer, you know, has to do most of his work with the other end of his body."

Bursting out laughing, the President dismissed Marshall and soon thereafter sent his nomination to the Hill.

Lenore Fine

Source: Lieutenant General John C. H. Lee, Notes on William L. Marshall, 19 Mar 53.

The Ability to Say “No”

Every year after General Douglas MacArthur's return to the United States from the Far East, the principal officers of his World War II command held a birthday dinner for him at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. Among those who attended was Lieutenant General Samuel D. Sturgis, former chief engineer of the Sixth Army in the New Guinea and Philippines campaigns.

At one of these dinners, soon after Sturgis became Chief of Engineers, MacArthur reminisced about his early years as an Engineer officer—his work in the Milwaukee District, his tour as commander of Company “M”, 3d Battalion of Engineers, and the course in field engineering that he taught at Ft. Leavenworth. Then, turning to Sturgis, the old soldier said:

Sam, always remember this: The Corps' fame is not the Panama Canal, the Washington Monument, the gigantic dams on the Missouri, flood protection and navigation on the Lower Mississippi and the Ohio, the wonder of its modern air base construction, and the like. What the Corps is most famous for is its ability to say “No” when “No” should be said.

Upon his return to Washington, Sturgis had a study made of the Corps' action on surveys since 1824. The facts bore out MacArthur's contention. In 45 percent of its surveys, the Corps had said “No.”

Lenore Fine

Source: Lieutenant General Sturgis, Memo for Record, n.d.

Captain Meigs and His Great Water Kettle

The water that Washington, D.C., drinks today is still delivered in part by the Aqueduct built in the 1850's by Engineer Captain Montgomery Meigs. An unknown officer when Chief Engineer Joseph G. Totten chose him, Meigs brought pride, style and ability to his job. In Congress he lobbied so skillfully for the improvement that grateful District of Columbia residents gave him a silver water kettle to symbolize his victory. When Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War and strongman of President Franklin Pierce's Cabinet, selected him to build the Aqueduct, Meigs flatly refused to give bond. “The security of an Engineer officer's commission and character,” he told Davis, “is better than the bond of a civil agent.” Davis agreed, and on this basis Meigs built the capital's water system.

Albert E. Cowdrey

Source: Albert E. Cowdrey, *A City for the Nation*.

On Professionalism

Insisting on the correct nomenclature, old Colonel E. E. Winslow used to remind young officers that the difference between “Engineer Corps” and “Corps of Engineers” was the same as the difference between a “beer bottle” and a “bottle of beer.”

Lenore Fine

Source: Letter, Major General Julian L. Schley to Historical Division, 5 Sep 53.

Mark Twain’s Myopia

As General Dwight D. Eisenhower used to say, hindsight is always 20-20. Foresight is something else.

Keen observer though he was, Mark Twain missed the target when he predicted failure for the Corps on the Mississippi. In his delightful and witty book, *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain had this to say:

The military engineers . . . have taken upon their shoulders the job of making the Mississippi over again—a job transcended in size only by the original job of creating it. They are building wing-dams here and there, to deflect the current; and dikes to confine it in narrower bounds; and other dikes to make it stay there

They have started in here with big confidence, and the best intentions in the world; but they are going to get left. What does Ecclesiastes VII, 13, say? Says enough to knock *their* little game galley-west, don’t it?

For those who flunked Sunday School, Ecclesiastes VII, 13 reads: “Consider the work of God; for who can make that straight which He hath made crooked?”

If Twain came back to life today and saw the Mississippi, he’d have to write a different version.

Or perhaps he might get off the hook by quoting one of his own aphorisms: “Prophecy—two bull’s eyes out of a possible million.”

Lenore Fine

Source: Caroline Thomas Harnsberger, ed., *Mark Twain at Your Fingertips* (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1948), 279 and 384.

Engineering for Posterity

Sound workmanship is an old Corps tradition. Witness the first major Engineer work for the nation's capital—Fort Washington on the Potomac. Ordering construction in 1815, Colonel Joseph G. Swift instructed Lieutenant Colonel Walker K. Armistead: "Let us have it done for posterity, or not at all." Armistead replied that he would build a fort "exceedingly strong, of the most durable materials, and executed in the best manner." After serving in the Civil War, the fort still stands today, a major tourist attraction and a regional landmark.

Albert E. Cowdrey

Source: Albert E. Cowdrey, *A City for the Nation*.

Telling it Like it Is

Some folks accuse Army Engineers of patting themselves on the back. If, at times, they do seem boastful, it may be because they have something to boast about.

At a convention of the American Historical Association in the late 1940's, Dr. O. J. Clinard, then our Corps of Engineers chief historian, was in a cocktail lounge with friends. After a few drinks, Clinard started extolling the glories of the Corps and was soon reeling off a list of Engineer "greats":

Sylvanus Thayer, "father of West Point"

John C. Fremont, "pathfinder of the West"

Gouverneur K. Warren, hero of Gettysburg

George W. Goethals, builder of the Panama Canal

Charles G. Dawes, vice president of the U.S. under Coolidge

Lucius D. Clay, post-war governor of Germany—

At that, a friend broke in: "Hold on, old buddy. Next you'll be telling us that Robert E. Lee and Douglas MacArthur—our greatest soldiers—were Army Engineers."

Clinard beamed.

"Go look 'em up," he said.

Lenore Fine

Source: As told to Lenore Fine by O. J. Clinard

How to Get Things Done in the Army

Most soldiers have heard one version or another of the flag pole story. Lieutenant General Samuel D. Sturgis, Jr., Chief of Engineers in the 1950's, had his own way of telling it.

As a lieutenant in the 1920's Sturgis served with the Horse Engineers at Fort Riley, Kansas. The Post Commander was a crusty old Cavalry colonel, a spit-and-polish officer and a bit of a martinet. His junior officers never dared laugh unless he laughed first.

At a staff meeting one morning the colonel reprimanded the Post Quartermaster because the parade-ground flag pole was not perpendicular. Then, pointing to Sturgis, he snapped: "Lieutenant, if I told you to put up a flag pole, and get it straight, how would you go about it?"

"I'd say: 'Sergeant, erect the flag pole'," Sturgis replied.

Dead silence.

Then, the colonel chuckled and the others joined in.

Lenore Fine

Source: Told to Lenore Fine by Lieutenant General Samuel D. Sturgis, Jr.

An Example of Good Leadership

In August 1917 Colonel Lytle Brown took command of the 106th Engineers at Camp Wheeler, Georgia. Brown, who later served with distinction as Chief of Engineers, had the reputation of being a brusque soldier and fine field commander. Because he felt that citizens had been drafted to become soldiers and not to be orderlies, he forbade his enlisted men to split and haul logs for any officer. Officers, he insisted, should gather their own firewood.

As good commanders should, Colonel Brown set an example for his unit. Every evening between five and six, he was a familiar sight at the woodpile, his pipe gripped firmly in his teeth, chopping firewood for his own use. His early upbringing on a Tennessee farm was evident in the skill with which he swung that important pioneer tool, the ax.

Colonel Brown took a particular interest in Lieutenant Bartley M. Harloe, the only other regular army officer in the regiment. When Harloe reported for duty, Brown asked him, "Where were you born and brought up?"

"In Brooklyn," Harloe replied.

"City bred," Brown exclaimed. "That is a hell of a background for

an Engineer officer. Do you know how to swing an ax?"

"A little," Harloe answered softly.

"Well," said Brown, "meet me at five o'clock every evening at the wood pile. You will need instruction."

During the cold winter of 1917, Lieutenant Harloe split logs under the careful tutelage of Colonel Brown. And, during those strenuous sessions, the Colonel taught the Lieutenant other things as well, impressing upon his young subordinate the high standards of performance expected of an Engineer officer.

Harold K. Kanarek

Source: Ltr, Colonel Bartley M. Harloe to the Chief of Engineers, 23 May 1964.

Only Make-Believe

Army maneuvers, which simulate real war, have given rise to many humorous stories. Military engineers, who pride themselves on their ingenuity, usually get a kick out of this one.

During maneuvers in Louisiana in 1941, an umpire decided that the enemy had blown up a bridge and flagged it accordingly. Henceforth, men and vehicles were not to use it.

A short time later, an Engineer lieutenant came up with his platoon, looked at the flag, scratched his head, and then began marching his men across.

"Hey," yelled the umpire, "can't you see that bridge is out?"

"Sure," the lieutenant answered, "I can see the bridge is out. Can't you see we're swimming?"

Lenore Fine

Source: Adapted from Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (New York: Doublday & Company, Inc., 1967), 243 - 44.

Every Man in His Place

Lieutenant General Samuel D. Sturgis, Jr., Chief of Engineers from 1953 - 1956, was fond of categorizing people. For example, all

officers were either “on the job” or “on the make.” Another way of grouping them was as follows:

First, the intelligent and industrious: the salt of the earth—beyond price.

Second, the stupid and lazy: relatively harmless to anybody.

And last, the stupid and industrious: the anathema of mankind.

Lenore Fine

Source: Conversation with General Sturgis, c. 1962.

One Man’s Castle Is Another Man’s Pen

The castle insignia of the Corps of Engineers symbolizes fortification, a traditional activity of military engineers. A stylized reproduction of the old Porte Chausee of the city of Verdun, the castle reminds today’s Engineers of their military heritage and of the great military engineers whose heirs they are—men like Vauban, Carnot, and Brialmont. Over the years, many stories have arisen about the castle insignia.

This one dates from World War I.

During his first days in camp, a timid recruit kept trying to identify the various branch insignia. After about a week, he reported to his tentmates:

“I think I have most of them straight. The crossed guns are for the doughboys; the crossed flags are for the Signallers; the pineapple’s for the Ordnance; and the corkscrew’s for the Medics.”

But the castle had him stumped.

“For the life of me,” he said, “I can’t figure out what that darned penitentiary stands for.”

Lenore Fine

Source: Adapted from *The Military Engineer*, XV (September - October 1923), 450.

Up In Smoke: William Ludlow And The \$50 Bill

Brigadier General William Ludlow, now almost forgotten, was one of the best known Engineer officers of his time. An 1864 West Point graduate, a Civil War hero, western explorer, hydraulic engineer,

military attache in London, and general in the Spanish-American War, his reputation for probity was second to none.

In 1883 he was granted a special leave of absence from the Corps to take the position of Chief Engineer of the Philadelphia Water Department for a 3-year period. There he helped lead the city's fight against both water pollution and political corruption. The following story illustrates his character.

A man whose factory required a great deal of water was accustomed to making frequent visits to the Water Department to ask for special favors. When he visited Ludlow for the first time, he found him very polite. Taking a \$50 bill from his pocket, he handed it to Ludlow, who looked at it for a second and then, spreading it out on his desk, asked, "My dear sir, what is this for?"

"Oh," said the factory owner, "that's to buy cigars for the boys."

"I suppose," said Ludlow, "you're fond of the weed yourself?"

The factory owner, it seems, enjoyed nothing more than a good cigar.

"Allow me," said Ludlow, taking out a box of Henry Clay Specials, whereupon each man helped himself to a cigar and bit off the end.

Ludlow rolled up the \$50 bill and holding it up to the gaslight, set it on fire; he then lit his own cigar, and turning to his visitor, said, "Permit me."

With two or three gasping inhalations, the startled man managed to get a light, keeping his eyes fixed on the burning bill. When the bank note had been reduced almost to ashes, Ludlow asked his visitor, "How do you like your cigar?"

It was said the man turned purple whenever the affair was mentioned and was only too willing to tell people what not to do when visiting the Water Department.

Albert E. Cowdrey

Source: *Engineering News and American Contract Journal*, II, (June 7, 1884), 291.